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CASE STUDY

Learning together: A case study of a partnership to co-create assessment criteria

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ABSTRACT

This case study outlines a staff-student partnership to co-create generic assessment criteria to use in a UK business school. It highlights the potential for staff-student partnerships to create a temporary subfield, in which the established power differentials of academia are dissolved and partnership values can be established. We draw on a series of 10 semi-structured interviews with partnership participants. The values that underpin partnerships are linked to three major phases of the partnership process: establishing the partnership, partnership operation and atmosphere, and the partnership outcomes. The findings indicate that the values of authenticity, reciprocity, and inclusion are critical antecedents to establishing a successful partnership and that careful attention should be paid to establishing the partnership. The case extends our understanding of the partnership process by emphasising these antecedents. The study is multi-authored, which reflects an extension to the partnership process described in the case study.

KEYWORDS

students as partners, partnership values, reciprocity, authenticity, power

Whilst the existing literature on staff-student partnerships features localised, assessment-specific examples of criteria creation (Deeley & Bovill, 2017; Meer & Chapman, 2015). The case discussed in this study extended partnership activity to the revision of assessment criteria across all programs at a UK business school. The partnership created a temporary subfield in which the traditional hierarchies of academia were dissolved to enable co-creation to take place.

Despite continued work to address assessment and feedback practices within the business school, student experiences of assessment and feedback persisted as a source of dissatisfaction. This was evidenced by student feedback collected through external references. For example, the National Student Survey (NSS) (Office for Students, 2018a), undertaken by all finalists, asks a series of questions related to assessment and feedback which enable subject groupings to benchmark student responses over time and also in comparison to other institutions.

During the following academic year, the school's Education and Students Committee had worked extensively to revise the assessment criteria without reaching consensus. It was felt that the student voice was missing, and this led to the staff-student partnership described in the case. As such, the project was focused on quality assurance activity (Healey & Healey, 2018).

The case study is organised to foreground the inter-relationships which underpin the contextual nature of co-creation activity (Healey & Healey, 2018) as follows. The first section outlines the context of the co-creation activity, known as 'the Assessment Connector project'. The conceptual framework is introduced in the following section. The third section describes the research method followed by the interview findings in the fourth. The fifth section discusses the findings in relation to the literature and the relationships to broader conceptual frameworks, followed by the conclusion.

THE ASSESSMENT CONNECTORS

In this section we outline the context of the Assessment Connector project along with its aims, scale, and timeframe. The project was constituted to update the school's assessment criteria, which is used by academics to develop assessment-specific rubrics and, as such, sits at the meso level of engagement (Healey et al., 2010). The existing criteria comprised a mix of a school-wide holistic criteria supplemented over time with departmental criteria. However, adoption was variable and confusing to students who could not identify the progress across the various levels of study or differences between departments within the school. This was significant, as the assessment literature suggests that students develop their evaluative capacity through reference to similarity in criteria across a number of assessments (Bearman & Ajjawi, 2021). Student feedback on the existing criteria implied that they were "too dense and abstract to enable them to make judgements about quality" (Carless & Boud, 2018, p. 1317).

As the criteria were to be used throughout the business school they needed to reflect the quality standards (Quality Assurance Agency, 2014) and be sufficiently flexible to be applicable to the range of assessment types undertaken. Establishing descriptors that mapped to the school's overall learning competencies was expected to lead to feedback being easier to action (Nicol, 2010). At the same time it was acknowledged that the clarity of the language for both staff and students was critical and likely to be one of the most challenging aspects of the development process (Reddy & Andrade, 2010).

The project ran for a period of 7 weeks from late July 2020, culminating with the launch of the new assessment criteria at the annual Away Day in September prior to the start of the new academic year. Each week there was a plenary to which all parties were invited, and, in between, subgroups worked on set tasks which were subsequently presented in the plenaries. Meetings were exclusively online due to the pandemic.

The Connector Programme at the University of Sussex forms an umbrella framework for a wide variety of co-creation activity. It is funded via the university's Access and

Participation Plan (University of Sussex, 2020). Access and participation plans outline how UK higher education institutions are working to improve equality of opportunity for under-represented groups in higher education, including access, progression, and outcomes. The UK regulator, the Office for Students, monitors the progress of institutions against these plans (Office for Students, 2018b). All student connectors are paid for their work on the various projects (Marquis et al., 2018). Staff can initiate a project through completing a project brief and submitting it to the Student Connector team. Once approved, the Student Connector team oversee recruitment and training of students prior to the start of the project (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020). The adverts emphasise that no formal work experience is required to apply and that inclusion and diversity are at the heart of the Connector Programme (University of Sussex, 2021).

Six students were recruited to the project from a variety of different years of study and degrees both within and outside the business school (Table 1). Staff were recruited to the project by invitation to ensure representation of a broad range of experience and departments and to help facilitate the implementation phase in their departments. Mindful of reported concerns that female staff are more likely to undertake this type of work (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020), a gender mix was sought. Five women and four men participated in the project (excluding the female project lead who chaired the sessions). Staff recognition for project participation was via a certificate (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020). Faculty were encouraged to use their contribution as part of their scholarship evidence and contribute further to staff workshops, blogs, etc.

Table 1. Profile of student project participants

CHARACTERISTIC	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Second year of study	4
Final year of study	2
Men (incl. transgender men)	2
Women (incl. transgender women)	4
Non-binary	0
No data on gender reported	0
White	2
Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME)	3
No ethnicity data reported	1
First-generation students	3
Non-first-generation students	2
No data reported	1
Students with a declared disability	3
Students without a declared disability	2
No data reported for disability declaration	1
Mature students	1
Not mature students	4
No data reported on age	1
UK domicile	3
International domicile	2
No data reported on domicile	1
POLAR* Quintile 1	3

POLAR Quintile 2	0
POLAR Quintile 3	0
POLAR Quintile 4	0
POLAR Quintile 5	0

*Participation of local areas (POLAR) data (measure of how likely young people are to participate in higher education across the UK)

Source: Devised by author using connector programme application data mapped to Access and Participation Plan Criteria (University of Sussex, 2020)

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Bourdieu's (1988) work on academia highlighted the rituals of the university and their role in maintaining the ongoing power relationships and the status quo. The power relationship between staff and students is sustained in the university environment through the day-to-day practices of the physical environment, for example, the lecture room and the language that is used (Bourdieu, 1988). For co-creation projects to be successful it is essential that the process overcomes these barriers by bringing together a group with differing capitals to address a specific challenge (Bourdieu, 1998) and disrupt the existing practices.

Bourdieu's analytical framework can be applied to co-creation projects (Matthews et al., 2018). Each partnership creates a new sub-field in which the partners explore different ways of relating to each other outside of their respective positions of power within the field of the university (Bourdieu, 1988). In this newly established subfield, the participants are freed from their habitus as staff or students and work together prior to returning to their respective positions in the field. Rapidly establishing new ways of relating to each other is critical to success.

RESEARCH METHOD

Following the conclusion of the Assessment Connector Project, students were invited to express interest in writing up the case. Two of the students had commenced their graduate roles following graduation, and out of the remaining four students three were keen to extend the partnership beyond the initial project. In this sense the relationship changed from the students working as pedagogical co-designers to co-researchers (Bovill, 2019).

The research phase was conducted under ethical approval (ER/SS706/16), and students were supported to undertake a series of semi-structured interviews in line with recommended practice. Interviews were undertaken with both the staff and students who participated in the project to better understand their perspectives of how the project worked to bridge the mismatch in expectations that it sought to address (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). All students who participated in the project were approached for interview and ultimately five of the six students were interviewed. All staff project members, excluding the two staff researchers, were also contacted. Of the remaining eight members of staff, five participated in the interviews, of whom four were academics.

The staff-student research team co-designed an interview questionnaire mapped to the values of partnership (Healey et al., 2014). Healey et al. (2014) reinforce the argument that partnership is a process underpinned by specific values which, when successfully established, foster an atmosphere where co-creation can take place. The research aim was to develop an understanding of how these values were established, if at all, during the

course of the partnership. Interviews were undertaken online via video interview between 2 December 2020 and 3 February 2021 and lasted around 30 minutes. The interview transcriptions were manually coded by the researchers using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020), moving between the transcripts and the themes as part of an iterative process. This helped us select quotes that were representative of the themes emerging from the data.

FINDINGS

The themes that emerged mapped to three distinct phases of the partnership: establishing the partnership, the partnership operation and atmosphere, and the partnership outcomes. The findings also have a sub-mapping to the values of partnership from the literature (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014).

Establishing the partnership

Important values in establishing a successful partnership were authenticity, inclusivity, and reciprocity (Healey et al., 2014), which helped create a motivated partnership team.

Authenticity

We worked to define the perceived problem with assessment and feedback, who it affected, and what the implications were. This helped to establish authenticity in the partnership as various perspectives were presented. For example, one staff member explained, “I think that my attitude was, I want to listen and understand rather than to listen and provide an answer. The word ‘connectors’ really made me think that I really want to do it” (Staff 3).

Both students and faculty had personal experience of the issues that the project sought to address, and these experiences had also been validated by external references, for example, the NSS. One of the students remarked the project played an important role by bringing students and staff together with a clear purpose, “you know, just build that sort of bridge between the students and the university to start to improve the overall grading system” (Student 2).

All interviewees were clear that the partnership was focused on the revision of the school’s assessment criteria and that increased clarity in relation to the standards would help students to focus their efforts and help faculty to set expectations regarding the level of performance required at each grade band. This common goal brought staff and students together as highlighted by one of the students, “And it really did feel like we’re working towards a common goal” (Student 3).

Inclusivity

The project team was relatively large; nonetheless, the broad range of experience and participation of non-teaching staff (e.g., academic developer, student academic success advisor) did lead to a diverse group. One of the staff members commented: “What’s important in team like that, is that you have all of the major stakeholders represented and I think it did” (Staff 2).

Students from both within and outside the school participated in the project, which was helpful in drawing on different experiences of assessment. In addition, the spread across the various year groups and between UK domiciled and international students helped

to extend the range of experiences articulated (Student 4). However, it was also noted that “you don't get the opinions of those who, you know, probably aren't as engaged students. . . . But then how you incorporate that I'm not too sure” (Student 3).

This is a recognised challenge for co-creation projects outside full-class participation. It was partially mitigated by a survey run by the connectors and the overarching project recruitment and selection.

Reciprocity

Parties stood to benefit from participation in the project in multiple ways. Students were paid to undertake the work at a time when little other work was available to them due to the pandemic. The experience also supported skills development, as a comment from a student shows: “I think it's helped me develop a lot of skills, time management, team-working adaptability, especially with Covid and the pandemic” (Student 1).

In addition, students could relate to the project aim from their own assessment experiences. There was also an altruistic motive for some interviewees who cited that they wanted to improve the situation for others. The reciprocity felt was articulated by one of the students in this way: “I've done a good deed for the university by putting back from everything they've given to me” (Student 2).

Staff who participated in the project did so voluntarily. Recognition was by means of a certificate at the end of the project and through the range of activities developed to support the revised assessment criteria. “I've got to know other members of faculty that I wouldn't necessarily know because, to a certain extent faculty tend to work in their silos” (Staff 1).

Not all benefits may have been anticipated by participants at the start of the project. Due to the pandemic conditions and working from home, a greater emphasis may have been placed on the regular interactions by interviewees.

Partnership operation and atmosphere

Given the acknowledged power differentials that exist between staff and students, the establishment of an atmosphere which sought to establish a new space for co-creation, where the power differentials are minimised and the project members felt empowered to contribute, was important. The values that contributed to this atmosphere were empowerment, with challenge and trust emerging as subthemes (Healey et al., 2014).

Empowerment

In recognition of the power differentials involved, the initial sessions involved setting expectations and listening to all views. This helped create a productive atmosphere as outlined by one of the student connectors: “I think . . . the atmosphere was always very collaborative and very open and allowed for the challenge . . . that was needed” (Student 3).

Another interviewee commented on the taken-for-granted nature of academic language, which is instrumental in reinforcing positions in the field: “sometimes we take language and terminology for granted, [with] not necessarily ourselves even understanding what it is” (Staff 1).

Staff participants felt that by working with the students that they were better able to question academic language and the barriers it can create and reinforce.

As the project progressed, the students gradually took more control as they worked on the supporting resources for students (e.g., leading on developing an animation and the

project communications plan). One staff member described this process as empowering for the students (Staff 5). Another staff member recalls feeling differently:

There were times when we felt a bit like external advisors to the project. But. . . I suppose this was very much towards the end when you guys were doing all the work. . . . but to start with it didn't feel that way. It felt like we were all in it together. (Staff 4)

This indicates that the perceptions of team members differed according to their expectations of their input into the project. Student interviewees expressed that they felt comfortable challenging others where they felt necessary as illustrated by this comment:

So, I think one of the most important and dominant things in our team was that everyone was able to voice their opinion and talk about it. And if anyone had like, a kind of a concern or kind of opposing view to someone else they could . . . just clearly speak about it. (Student 4)

Others expressed the increase in confidence and skills development that took place during the project which is reflected in the following student comment: "it was a good opportunity to boost confidence and kind of developed skills in different areas" (Student 3).

Student participants also mentioned that since the end of the project they felt more confident approaching staff. "I was able to develop some networks with faculty" (Student 4).

Partnership outcomes

A sense of ownership of the partnership outcomes was established through the joint values of community and individual responsibility (Healey et al., 2014).

Community

Interviewees expressed that they felt that their contributions were valued and that they owned the overall outcome rather than specific elements of it. One staff member commented that the project helped students realise how deeply staff care about student success :

And I was very happy to listen from the students that for them [the partnership process] had been a revelation in terms of understanding. Maybe they have realised for the first time that we really cared about them. We really wanted them to succeed, we were on this side of the students. . . . We were together in the same journey. (Staff 3)

The sustained attendance at the project meetings and significant ongoing dialogue between the project members, both students and staff, indicates that a sense of community was achieved.

Responsibility

The interviewees expressed feelings of responsibility for the successful conclusion of the project and its subsequent implementation. This shared responsibility was felt by all

interviewees as illustrated by this staff member's comment: "if I make an effort on something, then I tend to adopt it and feel responsible for it, want it to be a success and push it quite hard" (Staff 2).

The personal responsibility felt by the interviewees helped motivate the contributions that they made and the adoption and communication of the assessment criteria within the school. Student interviewees mentioned talking to their peers about the new assessment criteria. For example, one student commented: "it's a positive feeling, because I have received some really great feedback from students that are benefiting from the new marking criteria" (Student 4).

DISCUSSION

Partnership activity offers a means of creating a temporary subfield, one where staff and students are empowered to move from their established positions of power to work collaboratively, resulting in enduring changes to their individual social and cultural capitals (Bourdieu, 1986). We find that this dissolution of barriers is facilitated by establishing the partnership with participants who articulate the values of authenticity, inclusivity, and reciprocity.

Reciprocity was a central theme, although each participant contributed and received something different from the experience of a deconstruction of the power structures associated with their positions within the university (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017). For the staff members who participated, the rationale was predominantly one of institutional gain due to the limited range of individual incentives available to encourage engagement.

The establishment stage of the partnership was found to be an important antecedent which set the backdrop for the partnership operation and atmosphere. This led to feelings of empowerment and trust with power shifting between staff and students during the project. The limited timescale of the project might have created challenges for developing the trust required to enable both staff and students to contribute freely (Bovill, 2020); however, the fact that the project took place outside of term time may have had a positive effect on the trust relationship.

The final theme from the interviews was the ownership of the project outcomes both collectively and individually. This is likely to be an important factor in the implementation of the assessment criteria and communication to staff and students.

CONCLUSION

The findings establish a linkage between partnership values (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014) and three stages of the project: establishing the partnership, partnership operation and atmosphere, and partnership outcomes. The values are interconnected and overlapping. They are critical foundations for any partnership process seeking to reduce the power differentials embedded in academia (Bourdieu, 1988) for successful co-creation activity. Therefore, careful attention is required in establishing the partnership, including the processes for recruitment to the team and how meetings are facilitated, thus enabling the foundational values of authenticity, reciprocity, and inclusivity (Healey et al., 2014). It is only then that participants can feel empowered and that meaningful co-creation can occur.

Limitations include the fact that all partnerships are heavily influenced by the context in which they are constituted and by membership of the partnership. We also acknowledge the study was small scale in nature, making it difficult to draw conclusions.

Ethics approval was received from the University of Sussex to undertake the research under ER/SS706/16.

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